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ABSTRACT

The ambivalent relationship between political theory understood as a sub-discipline within political science and political theory as an interdisciplinary theoretical activity with a long-standing historical tradition has been well documented. The schism between political theory and political science is seen by some as a recent tragedy within political science, one directly traceable to the absence of great contemporary thinkers within the discourse of political thought and perpetuated by the lack of theorizing common among most practicing political scientists. In an interdisciplinary team-taught honors course, students were introduced to the three most interesting philosophical controversies present today in empirical political theory: (1) the question of whether individual or structural models of explanation best explain human political activity; (2) the possibility of having a value free model of theoretical explanation; and (3) the question of whether theory properly arises out of empirical research or is in some sense presupposed by such research. Rather than abstractly arguing the merits of specific methods of analysis, the students used two of the most often cited alternatives of human behavior defended today in social science, the Stimulus-Response model and the Stimulus-Organism-Response model. The students are then instructed to develop research programs that will reflect the different approaches of these two contrasting methodologies and to compare the results gathered during the course of the semester. (BZ)

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Political Theory as Autonomous and Non-autonomous Enterprises: Teaching Political Concepts at the College Level

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Introduction

The ambivalent relationship between political theory understood as a sub-discipline within political science and political theory as an interdisciplinary theoretical activity with a long standing historical tradition has been well documented.[1] It is widely held that the separation which occurred in this century between political science and political theory reached its zenith in the early sixties. It is further believed by many that the "great vitality in the field of political theory", and some would say in political science proper, is a direct result of the "turning away" of the one from the other to the extent that political theorists have become "indifferent to much of academic political science."[2]

This schism between political theory, and political science however is not seen by everyone in such a positive light. Some would argue that there has been a recent tragedy within political science, one directly traceable to the absence of great thinkers within the discourse of political thought.[3] They would argue that what passes for mainstream political science is negatively affected by the lack of theorizing common among most practicing political scientists. Indeed, descriptive empiricism (as named by one critic) is critiqued not only for its failure to recognize the indispensability of theory in concept formation but also for its "paying insufficient attention to the realm

of morals, where men may be impelled to behave well and inspired to resist wrong doing."[4] It is important to distinguish what we mean by "theory". In the literature, "theory" has often been used in the sense of the overriding ideological committments that political scientists bring to bear when they practice political science, as in the case when one speaks of someone as being a liberal or a marxist. Some prefer to call this use of "theory", Grand Theory. "Theory" also is used to talk about the accompanying model which is often used in the formulation of an hypothesis in developing a research program. Finally there remains the older and much broader use of the term "theory" which treats "theory" as being interchangeable with "hypothesis" as when one says that that all scientific research is aimed at proving or disproving some theoretical correlation or causal pattern. It is the first two senses of "theory" with which we are concerned in this paper.

These issues raise the central philosophical question affecting political theory and indeed political science in our day: How should one attempt the unification of theory and practice within political science? This raises other specific questions concerning the contemporary scientific approach to politics; for example, what epistemological constrants, if any, does theory place on the practices of method when the researcher is engaged in the collection of empirical data, or the equally controversial issue of whether there can be a

value neutral discourse within which the practice of political science operates. These questions and others have occupied philosophers within the last twenty years, but they have not, with several notable exceptions, drastically influenced the work of the majority of working social scientists.

One natural place where these issues can be raised and where one is afforded the luxury of time and the opportunity to debate them is of course the classroom. The authors here are involved in an interdisciplinary team-taught Honors course which attempts to treat these issues within the context of demonstrating and practicing the accepted methodological principles of empirical political science. We believe that this course, as designed and tought, demonstrates the essential relationship between the empirical and analytical methods of research as carried out in political science and the normative and conceptual elements of political theory. In this paper we should like to characterize the issues as we understand them and present the fundamentals of our approach as practiced in this course. We hope that our presentation will illuminate our attempt to resolve the radical disagreements currently found within political science and political theory.

Historical and Conceptual Background

For many years most political scientists operated upon the belief that the role of theory is either minimal or non-existant. But such is not the case today. The Kuhnian revolution has taken place in the philosophy of science and the post-Kuhnian era is marked by the belief that the fact-theory dichotomy is much too simple and that the role of theorizing in science was grossly underestimated by the "received view" of logical empiricism. This is not to say that the behavioral or empirical approach to political questions has been lessened by these methodological advances. The dominant position within political science is most certainly the empirical/analytic approach and political theory most likely will continue to be viewed as a lesser phenomena in the political science association as witnessed by its position and role within the profession.

However, even within the descriptive orthodoxy of political science it has become clearer how theorizing plays a necessary role in science and that the committment to a theoretical component in empirical science does not commit oneself to bad metaphysics or even to metaphysics at all. Gone are the days of shallow inductivism as practiced by social scientists in the first half of the twentieth century as well as the "broad inductivism" of the respected logical empiricist Carl G. Hempel who defended this position as late as 1966. One of our goals in teaching our course is to show by example how these

changes in the philosophy of science have come to take place and how these changes are related to more substantive questions in political science

Ever since the development of Liberalism as an all encompassing political ideology in the seventeenth century, it has been the dominant tradition in political thought. One of the most fundamental tenets of Liberalism, indeed perhaps its central tenet, has been its committment to an individualist understanding of human agents and the institutions within which they operate. It has been no accident that the dominant epistemology within this tradition has been an inductivist empiricism since there is a natural fit between the ontological committments of liberal political theory and the reductive tendencies of empiricist methodology. On this model individuals are construed to be the basic entities in the political and social universe. The committment to liberty, autonomy and privacy in both their moral and epistemological senses lies at the heart of the enlightenment project. We try to demonstrate in our course how this understanding of human agents and their activities is compatible with the methodological requirements of a psychological interpretation of political behavior. That is, we show how a knowledge of a participant's attitudes and beliefs allows one to predict and describe their political behavior, especially their voting behavior.

What this demonstrates is the attractiveness of the instrumental interpretation of scientific theories which was introduced and made popular by the logical empiricist movement of the mid century. Given an instrumental account, the purpose of theories and laws is not to give a realistic account of the universe, but rather to provide lawlike generalizations that enable us to predict the behavior in question. In the social sciences we have developed these predictive techniques, as for example in regards to voting behavior, independently of raising questions concerning the realistic import of the discovered statistical correlations. There can be no doubt that individual variables such as Party Identification (PID) are most reliable in making such predictions. In fact it is their very success in making such predictions that enable practicing political scientists to predict as successfully as they do. The absence of a model associated with the "theoretical" prediction is not viewed as a serious drawback on this account. The natural tendency of empiricism to shy away from ontological interpretations of data buttresses this view of science. It even accounts for why theorists such as Hempel argued for, and defended as strongly as they did the equation between explanation and prediction. Hempel characterised the models associated with scientific theories as useful psychological devices to aid the theorists in the development or discovery of hypotheses. But the justification, and

hence the real workings of science are grounded in the successful predictions made by the confirmed lawlike generalizations of the theory.

This reductionist position has always been advanced by those who believe that the proferred method of explanation is that which moves from the whole to the part and explains the working of the phenomena in question by demonstrating the relavant factors or processes that cause the event to occur. This position has always enjoyed a wide currency of favor in the literature as it is a decidedly empirical method of explanation which eschews "metaphysical" explantions for physicalistic accounts of nature. In contemporary political science it is the most common form of theorizing which takes place. In our course we represent this position in terms of the behavioral approach. In particular we treat this postion as a form of political psychology and argue that the best forms of political explanation can be given in terms that are ultimately reducible to the attitudes and beliefs of political agents.

Perhaps the most interesting challange to the Liberal paradigm today comes from those who articulate a non-reductionist structural model of society, social scientists most influenced by Marx and Durkheim. There are several interesting versions of structuralism that have been developed in the current social science literatue which we might have chosen to use in our course. Many of these models come from

sociology interestingly enough and the one that we use is a version of a Marxist class oriented analysis which seeks to explain human behavior in terms of the organization of society and not in terms of the individual beliefs and attitudes held by those members of society. This position is non-reductionist in that it attributes to social stuctures and organizations a "causal power" over and above the free choice of the individual members of society. It also is a realist account of society, in that by positing the existence of classes in society, it makes realist claims about the existence of certain phenomena which could lead one to believe be that "metaphysical" claims are being advanced by empirical scientists.

Our suggestion then, is that one interesting way to construe the differences in contemporary political science is to show that the Marxist critique of dominant Liberal theory necessarily involves the critique of the methodological tenets of classical liberalism, i.e. its inductive empiricism. The Marxist claim is that there is an essentially irreducible realistic theoretical element in Marxist social analysis, the assertion that there exist well defined class structures in late industrial capitalist society. [5] The Marxist critique of Liberalism, understood both as a dominant ideology of Western European capitalist societies and as a theory of how science best operates, occurs then on two separate but related fronts. It concerns the Marxist claim that

individuals act out of attitudes and beliefs which themselves are shaped by the conditions of economic production and the consequent social reproduction which occurs within those economic structures. It also concerns the claim that the dominant liberal political science tradition works within the bounds of traditional empiricistic methodologies for self interested reasons. These are first, the restriction of science to that calculative instrumental self understanding which arose at the time of Hobbes and Newton. This understanding of science, according to the Marxist critique, contributes to the continued existence of alienated class structures. A Marxist realist science on the other hand, committed to the claim that it is capable of describing the world as it is, would presumably be in the position to critique and challenge the existence of these class structures. These class structures currently support present day scientific enterprises particularly those which are compatible with Liberal ideology. Another methodological position advanced within traditional liberalism, which according to Marxists supports the prevailing liberal ideology, is the belief that science operates within a value free methodology. This position was proclaimed and defended by Max Weber and has been defended by the majority of mainstream Western liberal political scientist since his time. Marxists argue that this liberal premise is defended in order that the disguised theoretical

assertion that individuals are the true cause of their own behavior may continue to operate within what is in fact a largely controlled deterministic system of capitalist production.

Teaching the Course

In order to demonstrate our belief in the necessity of theorizing, we introduce at the very beginning of the semester two different models of human action. We begin by distinguishing between a Stimulus-Response (S-R) model and a Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model of human behavior. For purposes of simplicity we use the S-R model as a strictly deterministic model although, in fact, nothing essential rides on this supposition. What is essential for our purposes is the claim that behavior can be predicted without reference to, or knowledge of, an individual's mental state. Although this model is more often associated with classical behaviorism and the reductionism of a Skinnerian psychological analysis we use it to stand for a Marxist structuralist account. We present this Marxist sociological account as being consistent with a S-R model of human action in the sense of being committed to a strong interpretation of the doctrine of historical materialism. We assume that one does not need to know an individual's attitudes or beliefs in order to predict their behavior because of the theoretical assumption that one's behavior and states of consciousness can be explained by the material conditions of production and

as used in our course stands for the view that human behavior, including political behavior, can be accounted for by such external, and hence observable, conditions as that of class conflict as found in late capitalism. This is the sociological model used in our course.

The S-O-R model also does not assume any specific cognitive psychological model of behavior. We use it to show that behavior, particularly political behavior, can be predicted on the basis of individual attitudes. We assume neither a voluntarist nor a deterministic model of decision making. We merely demonstrate how successful predictions can be made by using individual attitudes as the independent varable in a bivariate analysis of information gathered in the General Social Science research survey. We thus aim to demonstrate the attractiveness of a psychological model of political science which can be used to predict and describe political behaviors in voting and participatory situations. Our claim here is that this model of human behavior affords much sharper conceptual descriptions as well as empirically successful predictions of how human behavior occurs in society.

In order for students to compare the competing theoretical models, behavioral and structural, they need to learn to practice political science qua science. At minimum they must acquire at least beginning level skills in research design, statistical analysis of

data and the use of the computer to perform the analysis. The student must also become familiar with the major data bases and how these are collected. In effect they are asked to absorb, in part of a semester, what they might normally acquire in a semester of Research Methods and Statistics and one additional course in political behavior.

Only a few of our entering students are familiar with the use of the CRT's and these usually have experience only with word processing. Although an occasional student has been exposed to quantitative data analysis, most have never been near a main frame, let alone "logged on." Though all our students have written term papers employing historical or analytical techniques, the idea that research questions can be answered by examining numbers is foreign to most, frightening to many and even threatening to a few.

To provide the students with what they need to know in a short period of time, we have developed an effective syllabus and a teaching manual which provides step by step lessons and practice assignments. These enable the student to rapidly acquire the design and analytic skills they will need to deal with the ongoing theoretical dialogue.

The teaching manual begins with a brief introduction to the logic and assumptions of quantitative methods. It then moves the

student rapidly into a series of ten self teaching assignments in which the student learns to use the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze large data bases. In the first assignment the students learn to use the text editor, thus enabling them to write, store, submit, print and recall SPSS programs to analyze large data bases. In order to facilitate the students' acquisition of text editing skills, we provide two hours of supervision (one consultant to every three students) during this first "hands on" session. After the initial contact we continue to provide ongoing consultation services: the consultants are students who have taken the course in previous years. In order to encourage their participation as consultants, we provide a reward system which includes an hour of course credit, status and the opportunity to refresh and upgrade their own recently acquired computer skills. These consultants, approximately one to each five students, are each available for five hours per week in a "buddy" arrangement with current students.

Given the ongoing practice with the text editor in each of the succeeding assignments, the students become quite expert in obtaining and analyzing data in a rather short time.

In the succeeding lessons which we ask students to complete over the next six to eight weeks, they learn data transformation and

selection, (Recode and Select IF), levels of measurement (nominal, ordinal, interval and mixed), frequencies and descriptive statistics (mean and mode), Scales and indices, crosstabs with analytical and inferential statistics (lambda, gamma, chi square, z test, etc.), control models, breakdown (analysis of variance) and stepwise regression employing dummy variables where appropriate. In all of this we concentrate on breadth rather than depth of understanding. We do not attempt to, because we could not, transform students into sophisticated methodologists, statisticians or analysts in such a short span of time. What we do is provide a cookbook approach that teaches the student when to use what recipe, what the recipe will deliver and how it will taste. However, as we will demonstrate shortly our students are able to go well beyond the boiled eggs stage that is the usual level of work in most undergraduate research and methods courses.

Paralleling the computer assignments are a series of lectures and discussions which, in general, introduce students to the goals and methods of quantitative research and, in particular, stress the critical issues and information in each of the computer assignments. Students are encouraged to bring their questions, problems and discoveries to the class throughout the course, but particularly in the early weeks. In our experience we find that if one student is

having a problem, others are likely to be having similar troubles. Since each succeeding lecture assignment is built on the preceding work, it is important that each student understand and feel competent at each stage.

As students acquire the basic skills, we reintroduce the behavioral and structural theoretical models. Students are encouraged to compare the predictivity of these models in each of their assignments. For example, when students are working on crosstabs we suggest they compare attitudinal explanations (alienation, efficacy, information, party identification, etc.) of a given behavior with structural explanations (class, gender, race, etc.) of the same behavior. This can be done as simply as what we call the "Bet Your Life" game where we ask students after they have completed some elementary bivariate analysis to say which category or independent variable they would use (if they had to bet their life on one an only one) to predict behavior. For some behavior the strongest and most effective correlations with a political behavior are an individual's attitudes and beliefs. For others structural variables seem to account for the behavior in question. As we move on to control model assignments, we suggest that students use behavioral explanations controlling for structural factors and/or vice-versa.

As the course proceeds we examine how disciplines other than

political science (sociology and economics) perceive the theoretical dialogue we are examining. Students are asked to compare the same set of "Bet your life" explanations with social and economic, rather than political, behavior to see if similar explanations hold across differing types of behavior.

In order to complete the teaching manual assignments and their research papers, students are exposed to two major data bases. The first is the latest available issue of the General Social Survey (GSS) that we have on line in our IBM Mainframe. In 1985 this was GSS82. In 1986 this will be GSS85. As students become more knowledgeable and seek answers to questions that cannot be answered with GSS data, we introduce the student to Michigan's Survey Research Center's (SRC) American National Election data.

Although methodological questions regarding survey data such as the effects of question wording and order, response set, "yeh" saying, etc. are clearly appropriate within the theoretical issues with which we are concerned, we do not place this additional burden on our students. Although we mention these problem areas, we ask our students to accept the GSS & SRC data as valid outcomes of interviews in which the respondents' answers are honest and uninfluenced by either the interviewer or the form and order of the questions. Contrary to our expectations when we began this course, students seem

to have few problems with the idea that a randomly chosen sample of seventeen hundred to two thousand people can validly represent the American Public as a whole while not being able to speak with very much accuracy about sub-populations such as blacks, Jews, the elderly, etc. within it.

After learning how to do crosstabs, and crosstabs under control, the student is next confronted with the multi-variate causal complexity of the social sciences. Although we are aware of, and inform our students of, the statistical problem of using regression models to analyze non-interval data (Multiple classification Analysis would be more appropriate) and the problem of using dichotomous dependent and independent variables (Logit & Probit would be more useful) for simplicity's sake and with the knowledge that we are sacrificing some accuracy, we do not ask students to learn these additional procedures. Instead, we teach our students stepwise regression and how to employ dummy variables where nominal and poorly ordered ordinal data is all that is available. We do this for two reasons: the first, because we have insufficient time to teach more, and the second, because our students seem to have reached a level of saturation beyond which they cannot go in one semester.

Though some might suggest that we have provided our students with overly sophisticated techniques, it is our observation that the

more sophisticated the techniques these students acquire, the more excited they become about the possibilities for dealing with complex theoretical questions. Their final research papers often reflect both the acquired sophisticated techniques and their high levels of interest.

About two thirds through the semester students are asked to choose a research question relative to the ongoing theoretical dialogue. If the instructors think the question can be answered with the data available, the student is required to write a short research proposal designed to answer that question. If the proposal is approved, appropriate reading is assigned and the student begins to apply all they have learned to writing a research note. This note attempts to answer to the question they have raised.

At this point we would like to summarize four of the papers we received this past semester in order to illustrate both the methodological sophistication and the kind of substantive issues that our students deal with. Citing literature that finds social class controlled for political ideology is unrelated to sexually permissive attitudes, one of our students employed regression analysis to compare the relative roles of attitudinal and structural variables, other than social class, in predicting sexual attitudes. The dependent variable is an index of sexual tolerance made up of

attitudes toward premarital sex, extramarital sex and homosexuality. The attitudinal independent variables are religiosity, ideology. The structural variables are religion and education. The student also includes age, sex and marital status as possible predictors of the dependent variables. Her findings parallel the work of others in the field. Two of the four significant variables are behavioral, with the strongest predictor being religiosity and the third strongest, ideology (political liberals and moderates are more tolerant than conservatives). The second best predicter of tolerance is age, with older people being the least tolerant. The only significant structural variable was religion with Catholics least tolerant of sexual permissiveness.

A second student, in a wide ranging search, sought the source of support for the Equal Rights Ammendment (ERA) once again comparing structural with attitudinal variables. The student finds that the independent variables that are significant predictors of ERA support are abortion views with those having the most open view on abortion most likely to support ERA, party identification (democrats and independents support ERA) and age (the young support ERA). None of the structural variables, religion, income, residence, and education, are significantly related to support of ERA, and surprisingly neither is sex.

Two of four students produced interesting but atheoretical (at least in terms of our behavioural-structural dichotomy) papers. They are discussed here to indicate that the dynamics of doing research can move students away from the linkages we are attempting to establish bewtween theory and doing political science. Although it is something we would like to guard against in future classes, the quality of the students' efforts attests to the technological sophistication and the high level of interest we were able to nurture. Both studies looked at the issue of wage differentials in the marketplace. One paper sought specifically to measure the changing effect of gender on income. The first student researcher finds that gender, as compared to education, experience, race and marital status, is the best predictor of income differential. However, the effect of gender has decreased sharply between 1977 and 1982 whereas the value of education has risen. She suggests that if present trends continue, at some point in the future, being female will not lead to income discrimination.

These findings are supported by the second paper which sought to disclose the effect of education on income. Although one finds that an increase in the number of years of schooling is associated with an increase in income, the best predictor of income differences is gender. The data suggests that males controlling for education,

experience, area of the country, marital status, father's education and race are likely to earn 70% more than females.

It is important to note that out of a class of 15 not all the papers reached the quality of those discussed above. However, we should also note that none of the papers were poor. Because students have different ability and interest we do not expect that the papers we receive will be of equal quality. It should also be said that the course we offer is still under development and each time we offer it we further clarify our goals and improve our teaching methods. At this point however, we are pleased that we can take students with no background in quantitative political science qua science, excite their curosity, persuade them to learn new skills, encourage them to think theoretically, and do all of this in a relatively short period of time. What pleases us most, however, is that a quantitative researcher and a political philosopher have been able to rather smoothly combine their expertise and, in the classroom link political philosophy to political science. It suggests to us that political philosophy, at least in the way we have defined it here, has an important and ongoing place within the discipline of political science. It also suggests to us that the practice of political science can contribute much to the understanding of those working in political philosophy.

Summary

The conflicting models used in the course embody what are, in our view, the three most interesting philosophical controversies present today in empirical political theory. They are: 1) the question of whether individual or structural models of explanation best explain human political activity; 2) the possibility of having a value free model of theoretical explanation, as reflected for example in the liberal vs. Marxist debate in the social sciences; and 3) the question of whether theory properly arises out of empirical research or is in some sense presupposed by such research.

The specific method of this course, and we believe the greatest virtue of the course, is that we introduce the students to these queestions by having them engage in empirical research. Rather than abstractly arguing the merits of specific methods of analysis or engaging in abstract epistemological argument of the merits of positivism, empiricism or hermeneutical interpretation, we have the students use two of the most often cited alternatives defended today in social science. The students are then instructed to develop research programs that will reflect the different approaches of these two contrasting methodologies and to compare the results gathered during the course of the semester. The two models are then compared against

one another in terms of the superiority of statistical correlations made possible by the use of these models.

Footnotes

[1]Gunnell, J. G. "Political Theory: The Evolution of a Sub-field," in Finifter, A. W. (ed.), Political Science: the State of the Discipline.

The American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 1983.

[2]Kateb, George, "The Condition of Political Theory," in American Behavioral Scientist, 1977, Vol. 21, pp. 135-59.

[3]Ricci, David, The Tragedy of Political Science, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984.

[4]Ibid., pg. 304.